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ABSTRACT

A telephone survey interviewed 112 present and former American Indian students, most of whom were from the St. Regis/Akwesasne Mohawk reservation, attending State University of New York College at Potsdam (SUNY Potsdam). The survey was conducted to determine Akwesasne needs and wants, to ask what the college could provide, and to promote greater collaboration between the college and the reservation. Data are qualitative and presented in eight categories: declared or potential majors; previous college experience; work experience; what made a good class; what made a bad class; obstacles to college success; whether or not to recommend SUNY Potsdam to a friend; and recommendations to recruit, retain, and ensure graduation of Native students. Professors were what made a good class, and professors with narrow or biased attitudes made bad classes. Obstacles included large classes, financial problems, and nonrecognition (invisibility) of Native students; however, all but two interviewees would recommend SUNY Potsdam to friends. Recommendations were: extension classes on the reservation; more classes with Native content and integration of Native history, culture, and literature into classes; inclusion of Mohawk language classes; specific programs such as special education, counseling, or masters programs; Native counselors and support services; representatives to high schools; more summer classes; workshops for improving research and writing skills; and more state funding for Native American Affairs. Bibliography contains 16 references. (TD)

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EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF ST. REGIS/AKWESASNE MOHAWK COLLEGE STUDENTS AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK COLLEGE AT POTSDAM

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EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF ST. REGIS/AKWESASNE MOHAWK COLLEGE STUDENTS AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK COLLEGE AT POTSDAM

American Indian students seem to receive scant attention in articles about college minority recruitment, student retention and successful graduation in various publications on these issues, (A Nation at Risk,1983; Catteral and Cota-Robies, 1988; Chronicle of Higher Education Almanc Issue, 1998; Coombs, 1970; Jacob and Jordan, 1987) or at conferences addressing issues of minority college students. American Indians are a minority among minorities (Board of Indian Commissioners Annual Report). They (we) are a minority many college administrators overlook. "Because after all, there aren't any Indians around here, are there"?

Probably, there are American Indian students. The image of the "vanishing Indian" is so entrenched in the psyche of Americans it is very hard for many of them to recognize the Native peoples among them. Some people are dismissed as not "really Indian". These issues are part of my broader investigation of American Indian identity. For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on issues having to do with college recruitment, retention and the successful graduation of American Indian students. Every state in the United States except Hawaii has at least one federally or state recognized reservation. My present home state of New York has the tenth largest population of American Indians in the country. About 50% of American Indian peoples do not live on reservations. They live in cities, suburbs, farms, military bases- places where we find any other student (Board of Indian Commissioners Annual Report).

This invisibility is reflected in the broader experience of American Indians within the larger culture of the United States. Invisibility can take many forms for American Indians. Collegiate issues such as recruitment, retention and successful graduation of American Indian students rest on the assumptions that there are no Indians here and the non -recognition of Natives who are in the area. The first assumption is based on mistaken notions, such as that Native peoples in the eastern part of the United States died out long ago or were pushed west. While the populations of Native peoples east of the Mississippi tend to be small, they are still there and have tenaciously hung on to their identity, their land, their culture and in some instances their language. However, an estimated 50% of Native peoples

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across the country do not live on reservations. This is in part due to relocation and termination policies of the United States throughout the 20th century, and to Native peoples who left reservations for employment. Cities that were sites for relocation: such as Rochester and Buffalo NY, Milwaukee WI, and Chicago IL, have American Indian populations large enough to support cultural centers and social events such as pow-wows.

The other issue is non-recognition of the Native peoples who live around you. One of the factors with this issue are mistaken notions of what Indians look like- and how similar we all look. Not all Native peoples look like the stereotyped plains peoples popularized in movies and often played by Euro-American actors in wigs. The typical American believes s/he will recognize an Indian upon seeing one (Price, 1973). Even seventeenth century colonists had a hard time recognizing as Native American those Christian Indians who dressed in European clothes. That was one of the reasons Christian Indians were forced into isolated communities, frequently islands, so that there was less of a chance of mistaken identity. (Lepore, 1998).

Instead of assuming American Indian students are not there, assume they are. The question then is how to get them to your college, provide them with the appropriate services to see them successfully graduate. American Indians remain the most undeserved and impoverished population in the United States, yet despite this, the numbers of Native peoples going to college has been steadily increasing (Chronicle of Higher Education Annual Almanac; Winds of Change Annual College Guide for American Indians, 1998).

While Native students have experiences similar to other minority students, (racist incidents, a feeling of isolation and being cut off from family and community, and a very real sense of not being able to go home again) there are others that are uniquely their own. It seems to come as a surprise to many Euro-Americans that American Indians do experience racism. I have spoken to students who had experiences ranging from having other students doing mock warhoops and stereotypical dances outside their dormroom, to having a coach tell a student he would never succeed in college if he maintained connections with the reservation, to a student having a job application thrown in his face after being asked about his unusual last name. I have a colleague who was chastised by his department head for activities he included in a class on American Indian music. Instances of racism can take on particular focus for Native peoples such as the cutting comment that "you don't look like an Indian".

From these examples, it is clear that instances of racism do not stop at college doors. The obstacles Native students encounter do take a different tone then those experienced by other students. These obstacles can and do effect the success American Indian students experience in college. The rest of this paper will focus on the experiences encountered by students from the St. Regis/Akwesasne Mohawk reservation who attended the State University of New York College at Potsdam in upstate New York. Potsdam is a medium size (4,000 students) liberal arts college in the extreme northern part of upstate New York (about 1/2 hour from the Canadian border). Akwesasne, which is a 45 minute drive from Potsdam, straddles the U.S./Canadian border, and deals with U.S., Ontario and Quebec governments. Most of the American Indian students attending Potsdam are from Akwesasne, but there are a few from other American Indian communities around the state. Until about ten years ago Potsdam had no particular programs to attract potential students from Akwesasne, or to help them once there. There were some sympathetic and helpful professors, and successful Mohawk students, but no college-wide programs. The data were obtained from present and former students who attended Potsdam over the past eight years. One hundred twelve students were interviewed by phone about their experiences at Potsdam. Student names were obtained from enrollment lists of self-identified American Indian students. I believe data is missing from the most at-risk students, those who have moved, didn't have phones, or were otherwise unreachable. One of my research assistants is from Akwesasne, and she work very diligently to track everyone down, but many people could not be contacted. Confidentiality was maintained by using only numbers on the surveys themselves.

I felt this research was necessary for a number of reasons. SUNY Potsdam wanted to expand its programs and services to Akwesasne, but a needs assessment had never been done. Potsdam wanted to expand its services, but had no idea what the community needed or wanted. Within this vacuum some programs were being presented by various people at the college. In some instances proposals made by the faculty were duplications of long standing and successful programs implemented by people within Student Services. Potsdam has a Native American Affairs office, instituted in 1987, which provides services for Native students on campus, as well as providing programs such as the Potsdam Association of Native Americans, the Science and Technology Entry Program (which provides programs, tutoring and counseling for middle and high school students, and a summer program), College Science and Technology Entry Program, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, and the Potsdam-Akwesasne

Talent Search. Faculty suggesting programs seemed to be unaware of the office, or the programs and services it provided.

Faculty, on the other hand, report that student services resist offers of help or input, and don't understand the difficulty of being in a classroom, and make requests of faculty without recognizing the demands of teaching, research and service. This illustrates a serious issue in providing services to minority youth. The faculty side often doesn't know what the student services side is doing, and student services doesn't recognize the differing demands made on faculty. At Potsdam this gap is graphically shown by the academic and student sides of the campus which is divided by a road, Barrington Drive. I hoped, that by conducting this research, and making the findings available to the Akwesasne and Potsdam communities, there would be a better recognition of what Akwesasne needs and wants from the closest public college, what the college can provide, and greater collaboration between the various constituencies.

While much of the data gathered in this study is in line with other research I have read (A Nation at Risk,1983; Catteral and Cota-Robies, 1988; Chronicle of Higher Education Almanc Issue, 1998; Coombs, 1970; Jacob and Jordan, 1987), or heard presented at conferences about American Indian education, (such as the National Indian Education Association meetings), this study made specific recommendations to SUNY Potsdam. Some issues were raised which I have not seen in other studies, and I believe the findings and recommendations from this study would be helpful to other institutions.

- I will present the data within eight categories:
- declared or potential majors,
- previous college experience,
- work experience,
- characteristics of what made a good class,
- what made a bad class,
- obstacles encountered in attending college,
- would you advise a friend to come to Potsdam, why or why not,
- and finally, recommendations to Potsdam to recruit more Native students and steps the college could take to ensure retention and graduation.

These topics correspond to the questions asked in the survey. Interviewees were also asked if there was anything they wanted to add or say. These comments often contributed to one of the above categories.

Majors chosen by students included; criminal justice, politics (at least two students have gone on to law school), education, sociology, biology, history, psychology, computer science, English literature, math, physics, and music education, and the graduate program in education. At Potsdam undergraduates do not major in education. Students major in one of the arts and science departments, and take the necessary classes for an education certificate. As a result, many of the students indicate arts and science majors -particularly history, psychology and English-because these classes most easily contribute to the classes needed for the education certificate. Like most college students, these Mohawk students are most interested in majors that lead to jobs. Additionally, they are interested in majors that lead to jobs at Akwesasne.

Within the last five years, Akwesasne has obtained it own tribal police and court system. It has obtained increased control over it's own elementary schools, and a greater say in off reservation schools which serve Mohawk students. Environmental concerns, and settlements with industries which caused the environmental concerns led Akwesasne to open its own environment affairs office and work towards cleaning up environmental, particularly river pollution. For perhaps the first time since Akwesasne had a self-sufficient economy based on foraging and farming, young people with the right skills have the possibility of staying home and having employment. Increasingly those skills are acquired at college. In the spring of 1998 Potsdam graduated 15 American Indian students, in fall of 1998 all of those students were employed.

The Mohawk students seem to choose a college, in this case Potsdam, not just because it is close to the reservation, since there are four colleges within a ten mile radius of Potsdam, but also because of the majors it offers. One student told me he came to Potsdam despite being heavily courted by a private school in the area, specifically because Potsdam had a program of study he wanted, criminal justice.

College faculty and administrators may talk about transferable skills for a variety of careers, but these Native students have more immediate goals. Further, more then 90% of the students interviewed had previous job and college experience. Most of the American Indian students were not the average 18-22 year old college student. They were/are parents, veterans, heads of families, people bringing with them a wealth of experience and very specific goals to the classroom. A number of the men were former (and in some instances currently part-time) construction workers who wanted less physically dangerous jobs that would keep them

closer to home. Many women were pursuing careers they recently realized were within their grasp. These people are commuting almost two hours a day, in north country winters, to pursue their goals. These students don't want to hear about transferable skills of a lifetime of different jobs, they have already experienced that. They know what they want and need in classes, majors and careers.

Typically the recommendations made to and by colleges to increase American Indian recruitment and retention focus on the needs of 18-22 year old single, childless students. These are important programs such as the bridge programs between high school and college, summer orientation, special interest dorms or floors, special activities and programs. But what about commuting students whose bridge to high school goes back 5, 10, 15, 20 years? What about students who must take time off from work to attend orientation programs, or must choose between family obligations or attending special programs or activities? Previous work experience of the students included: construction, social work, school facilitator, work in a women's shelter, hairdresser, instruction in traditional arts, drug & alcohol counseling, retail office, bank clerk, work in the Bingo Palace, working for the Tribal Council, waitress, secretary, military experience, and being a mother and grandmother. Non-traditional or adult students, not just those from Akwesasne, have told me they feel like adopted or foster children at college. They are obviously older then the other students, and are often very engaged in the educational process: they speak up in class, ask questions, want to discuss, often to the eye-rolling and groaning of other students, and sometimes professors. The additional burden of being racially/ethnically different increases the isolation many of these students experience.

Both work experience and previous college experience contributed not only to choice of a college major, but also to the good and bad (positive or negative) experiences students had at Potsdam. One student stated his work experience had shown him the problems of many people, which influenced him to get an education so he could help them in their struggles. Another found that his age gave him experience and his perspectives were appreciated by other students and professors.

Many students had attended community colleges and were surprised to find that making good grades at the community college had not adequately prepared them to do well at Potsdam. This situation set up a conflict for students who enjoyed their experiences at community colleges. Students said the classes were "closer and smaller" and "family oriented". However, some students did recognize a problematic situation. One student

said of his community college experience, "High school was more like college. I didn't have to work hard at M. D." (a local church affiliated community college with satellite classes at Akwesasne). Another student said she felt she was adequately prepared at the same community college and was surprised when her Potsdam advisor told her "she would rather take D's from any other SUNY school then A's from M.D." The woman stated that as an older student she was able to cope with her advisor's attitude but was concerned that a younger student might be hurt by that statement.

Other students reported that having Potsdam relatively close by, and an academic experience that prepared them for jobs as plusses. Many students reported that smaller classes, and classes in which there was interaction between students as positive experiences. Students also thought having the same professor for more then one class was important. One student stated, "I got to know him and his teaching style. I was able to improve." In fact, by far the most important factor in the students positive experiences were the professors themselves. Students found some of their professors to be "helpful', "sensitive to native issues", "were good teachers and knew their stuff", "a good professor makes the class interesting".

However, while some professors contributed to the students positive experiences, others contributed to negative experiences. One student expressed it very succinctly. When asked what contributed to a good experience at Potsdam he said "The professors." When asked what contributed to a negative experience, he said, "Other professors." Professors were criticized for not showing understanding about family and other obligations, as well as not being sensitive to or knowing about Native American history or issues. But I think the main complaint against the other professors is best summed up by a student who said, "He thinks there's just one way of looking at the world."

I think it is this attitude that most alienates the American Indian students. Several students stated that while the Native American studies minor was an important plus for the college, American Indian history or literature should not only be taught in designated classes, but should be incorporated throughout the curriculum. The students reflect an important dilemma within the college curriculum. Programs like Native American studies, Women's Studies, Africana studies etc., give visibility, attention, and inquiry into areas often ignored in the educational curriculum. We should not assume that even the Native students know about their history, much less the history, culture or literature of other

Native American groups. Where/how would they learn this? It is not just the Euro-American students who tell me, "I didn't know the Iroquois had a role in the Revolution!" However, there is also a tendency to make some assumptions about such programs. First, there is the further avoidance of responsibility; "I don't need to talk about the Iroquois in the history of New York, the students can take a Native American studies class if they want to know about that". The issue is not what a student wants to know, but what an educated individual should know. The further invisibility of minorities, including American Indians, to the history and overall culture of the United States perpetuates not only racist attitudes, but the attitude that there is one American culture, one thread of American history. Or to paraphrase a student quoted earlier, "that there is only one way of looking at the world."

Second, programs such as Native American studies often become ghettoized within the curriculum. Other professors and students alike assume that these are "gut" classes, not up to appropriate academic standards. Faculty interested in promoting such programs find themselves constantly justifying the programs, and assuring others of their academic standards. Students often find themselves caught in these arguments. "I'd like to minor in Native American studies, but how will it look on my transcript" or "What can you do with that minor" are comments I often hear from Native and non-Native students. The attitudes of the "Other Professors" influence not just the students who are in their classes, but the much broader college culture encountered by the students.

The attitude of professors could also decrease or increase discomforted students felt in large classes. Large classes were another important issue for the Native students as they felt lost in the crowd, and that they never established a relationship with the professor or with other students. This is an important issue in establishing a sense of success for students early in their college careers. It is often the lower division/introductory classes that are the largest. It is these classes, early in their college experience students find to be the most intimidating. Further, currently within the SUNY system there is increased pressure to increase student enrollments to increase or even maintain funding. Increase enrollments will mean increased class size, at the very least in the short term. Yet these classes are found to be intimidating by at-risk students. The impact increased class size will have on the retention and successful graduation of all students must be examined.

The college culture beyond the classroom also has significant impact on the students. Advising was a particular problem. Students reported

being advised to take classes they were obviously not prepared for, not to mention classes for which they didn't have the pre-requisites. Getting into required classes, particularly for education students, was a problem that may contribute to delayed graduation and drop-out rates of students. Some students find aid and finances running out when they need to continue for an additional semester to finish required classes.

Despite these problems, students on the whole felt positive about their college experience. Reflecting back on his college experience, one student said that despite feeling some classes were a waste of time and that he was not well prepared, college was a good experience and was well-rounded and that he had learned more then he thought at the time. All but two students said they would advise a friend to come to Potsdam

American Indian students identified problems with finances as the biggest obstacle to completing their college degrees. Focusing on finances, however, is just the tip of the iceberg in examining obstacles to successful graduation. American Indian students (and other minority students) run out of money not just because they are more likely to come from poor homes and therefore must rely on various state and federal funds. These funds often have semester limits. Because American Indian students often take longer than four years (eight semesters) to graduate, they run out of available state/federal or tribal funding. Poverty makes it less likely the students' families can contribute to tuition and other expenses. Students who are already working to help support themselves now need additional income to pay for college. For students on reservations or rural areas, high rates of unemployment make this difficult.

Why do American Indian students often take more then four years to graduate? Frequently cited problems are money, commuting, and conflicts with family, work and other obligations. Another reason may be poor academic preparation. In the interviews most students indicated they were not prepared in general, or in critical areas such as mathematics, writing, and critical thinking and analysis. These comments were made by both students who came directly to Potsdam from high school, and those who had previous college and/or work experience. A recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education focuses on the academic intensity of a student's high school courses as an important indicator of success in college (Adelman, 1998). This is a factor not just for American Indian students. In an era of elimination of affirmative action programs and funding for minority students and minority programs, there must be attention paid to not just getting students to college for a semester or two, but successful graduation. For traditional college students this means not just high school

to college bridge programs, but communities working with the schools which educate their children to ensure the children are learning necessary skills to succeed in college. Capable American Indian high school students must be in academically rigorous classes. There has long been an assumption in many schools serving American Indian youth that they are not going to college and therefore only need basic skills for blue-collar jobs. This is not acceptable, both because of the inherent racist attitudes, but also because it condemns students to low wages, limited opportunity, and ever decreasing jobs. If colleges are serious about their commitments to American Indian or other minority students, they too should be working with public high schools to identify academic areas of weakness and ways of addressing those weaknesses, to ensure that minority students benefit from these programs.

- Other obstacles to success in college identified by the interviewees included:
- long travel or commuting time,
- too much freedom,
- adjustment to being away from home,
- poor study habits,
- lack of skills (particularly in conducting research),
- poor advising and not knowing who to go to for help,
- isolation from the community,
- Potsdam was a big campus for a small town girl,
- classes were huge and felt overwhelming,
- Potsdam is a party school with a lot of available alcohol,
- closed classes,
- discrimination in the dorms.

With the exception of the last factor, these are situations faced by all college students. With declining numbers of potential students, colleges are being forced to look into all factors that effect the successful retention and graduation of students. The issue of discrimination is an ongoing one that colleges can not ignore. If students are not comfortable in a college situation they will leave. Colleges can no longer sit back and assume students leave because they can't "cut it".

For non-traditional or adult students there is a different set of obstacles. Family obligations and work, as well as feelings of isolation are cited as problems and obstacles to staying in college. Solutions to these problems may be different then those for the more traditionally aged students. At Potsdam, non-traditional students formed their own student organization. They petitioned the college and received a lounge with study

carrels. Non-traditional students provide support for each other, not just academic help, but also providing rides and child-care. I pass the lounge several times everyday, and most of the students I see utilizing it are American Indian. As most of Potsdam's American Indian students are working towards education certificates, they have formed a lose association of education students (in addition to the Potsdam Native American Association). The issue of academic preparation is also a factor for non-traditional students. Because so many of the non-traditional students have attended community colleges, one solution may be a closer collaboration between two year and four year colleges. Within the SUNY system, there is a plan underway to address this issue. However, at Potsdam many students have attended a private, church affiliated community college. Collaboration in instances like this is more problematic and may require assistance from the college administrators.

- To attract and retain more American Indian students interviewees suggested:
- extension classes on the reservation,
- more classes with Native content and integration of American Indian history, culture and literature into classes,
- inclusion of Mohawk language classes,
- provide for specific programs such as Special Education, Counseling or Masters programs,
- a Native counselor and support services,
- send representatives, including students, to the high schools,
- offer more summer classes,
- workshops for improving research and writing skills,
- and more state funding for Native American Affairs.

A preliminary report about this study's findings was submitted to the previous college administration and the Merwin Institute of Rural Services (which helped fund the study). Classes have been taught at the reservation or nearby schools. However, professors have had to teach these classes above their regular loads at the campus, and classes are canceled if they are too small. The private schools in the area, and now Canadian schools, offer programs without regard to enrollment. Other colleges have filled in the gaps which Potsdam could or would not. This pass summer the college initiated a high school to college bridge program. This was in response to a shortfall of enrolled freshmen, and was targeted at all area students, not just those at Akwesasne. Many of the issues for non-traditional students remain, although actions taken by the students themselves have addressed some. For example, in the fall of 1998 Potsdam held a Saturday

orientation excessively for non-traditional and commuting students. In the spring of 1998 Potsdam graduated 15 American Indian students. In the fall of 1998 ninety-two American Indian students were attending classes at Potsdam. However, problems remain, particularly the problems of the "other professors", and working with public schools to ensure well-prepared students.

The problems confronting American Indian students are not always what we would expect from a surface examination. Nor are they the same for all students. I hope by presenting the results of this study to raise some areas of inquiry for others involved in American Indian education. To truly understand the needs of Native students, colleges must not make assumptions, but rather ask specific questions about the students they may potentially serve: who are they, were do they come from, what are their backgrounds, and what are their needs and goals. One size fits all programs will only meet the needs of some students and therefore are not very different from the dominant education system.

Furthermore, an alliance between those vested in improving the educational experiences of American Indian must be forged between communities, public schools and institutions of higher education, and overseen by the local communities, to ensure that Native students have the rigorous academic backgrounds to facilitate their success in college, their careers and to their communities.

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